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Water cleanup group fails to narrow choices on disposal of wastes

By Brent Israelsen
The Salt Lake Tribune

SOUTH JORDAN -- A group of 20 "stakeholders" appointed to help water officials decide how to dispose of briny wastes filtered from contaminated groundwater has failed to narrow down a long list of alternatives.

The stakeholders, parties potentially affected by the groundwater cleanup, had more questions than the Jordan Valley Water Conservancy District could answer during a three-hour meeting Wednesday night.

By meeting's end, the stakeholders were able to eliminate just one option -- an evaporation pond. But that action came only after a Jordan Valley engineer insisted his agency could not afford to purchase the land for the pond.

Still alive are six proposals that would send the briny wastes back into the ground, to the Great Salt Lake, to Kennecott Utah Copper Corp.'s giant tailings pond or to a yet-to-be-built distillation plant.

In deliberating whether to scratch an alternative, the stakeholders were hampered by insufficient information about what the various choices would cost, how they would affect the environment or Kennecott's operations.

"It's a real concern for me because I don't understand it," said Russell Ray, representing Copperton Township.

Jordan Valley assistant manager Richard Bay said he was confident the list could be narrowed by the end of their next meeting, on April 14.

"We'll just have to come up with more technical analysis," Bay said.

Jordan Valley's board

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of trustees hopes to decide on one alternative by April 28. The alternative would replace an earlier plan that called for the wastewater to be discharged directly into the Jordan River. The board abandoned that idea in January after significant public opposition.

The wastes would be the byproduct of a reverse-osmosis plant that would treat water pumped from a huge plume of groundwater beneath South Jordan that was contaminated by mining activities in Bingham Canyon conducted by Kennecott and its predecessor.

Kennecott already is cleaning up a similar plume farther west.

The mining company's interest in both plumes stems from a natural-resource damage claim it settled in 1995 with a \$9 million cash payment and \$28 million line of credit to the state of Utah. Those assets now are worth about \$61 million.

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